



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA  
MINISTRY FOR EQUALITY,  
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION



# Education

## TURNING THE TABLES

Facilitated by African Media Association Malta  
Prepared by: Shaun Grech (ADITUS)

2021

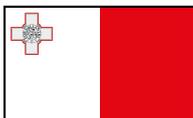




**GOVERNMENT OF MALTA**  
MINISTRY FOR EQUALITY,  
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**This report rounds off with a number of recommendations or 'possible solutions' articulated by participants**



# Summary

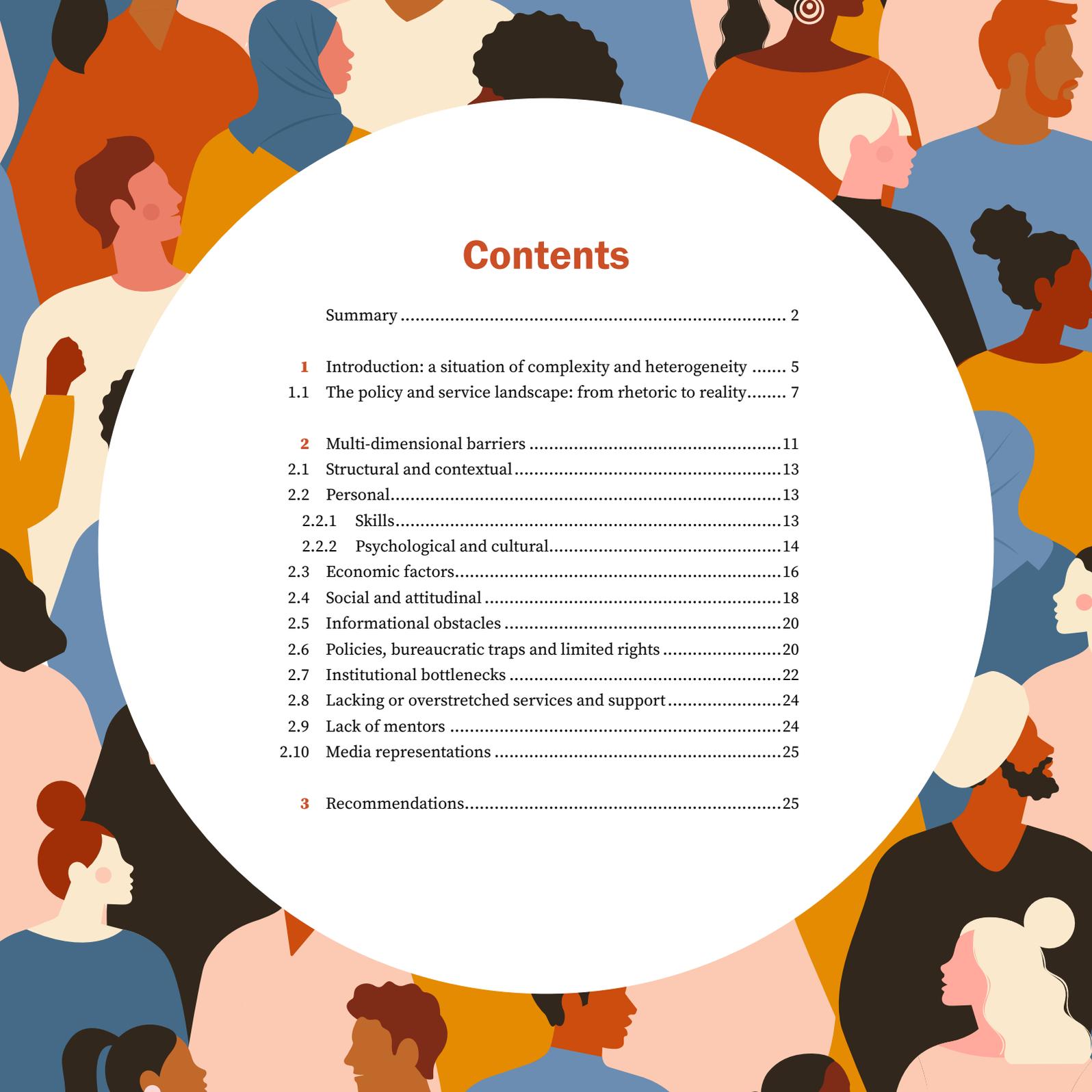
**This report presents outputs and key points raised during the pre-conference and conference on education as part of the migrant-led project, Turning the Tables, coordinated by African Media Association Malta (AMAM).**

AMAM brought together relevant stakeholders, migrant communities and the general public to brainstorm and debate each of the 5 selected topics: Education; Employment; Documentation; Detention; and Political Rights. The main aim was to facilitate dialogue and learning, and in this report, we address the educational situation confronting a range of migrants in Malta, the multiple barriers and challenges, and to explore a number of possible 'solutions' to these. The sections below lay out the key findings specific to education, highlighting a situation marred by multidimensional barriers traversing the social, economic, political, cultural, personal, institutional, and multiple other spheres, often interacting and dynamic.

Migrant learners meet a context and system that are not only unprepared, but also ill-equipped to deal with their diverse and heterogeneous needs and demands. The barriers are rife, including language barriers and lack of services to address these; insufficient measures at tackling illiteracy; legal and bureaucratic issues and delays in the asylum process and residency; delays in recognition of certificates; inadequately trained teachers especially in cultural and other skills required for inclusion and integration (e.g. to address diversity in class); lack of effective teaching resources and adaptation to the needs of migrant learners; non-inclusive curricula in schools; informational barriers; and racism to name but a few of these obstacles. These are particularly tough to navigate for refugees and asylum seekers and

also third country nationals (TCNs), those perpetually relegated to the margins, where integration remains a farfetched reality. What emerges most clearly is that the bid to merely survive often competes with and ultimately interrupts education at some point, a reflection of basic needs towering over educational ones, especially for those who are poorer and/or in more vulnerable situations. It is important to note, though, that different migrants confront different situations, making it hard to generalise these obstacles and their extent and intensity. They come with different situational, cultural, educational, language, economic, literacy and also social backgrounds and legal status, impacting the extent to which they can access and sustain their education and also navigate the system.

However, what emerges is that despite this heterogeneity, barriers in some shape or form appear to cross-cut the journeys of the majority of migrants, and for most it means dropping out early, not furthering education to a point that would be possible or desired, or not entering at all. This report rounds off with a number of recommendations or 'possible solutions' articulated by participants, recommendations that, just like the barriers cut across dimensions, sectors and areas. Instead, possible interventions need to cover the social, economic, political, ideological, institutional, personal, psychological and other dimensions, while being constantly alert and responsive to the multiple interactions between these.



# Contents

Summary .....	2
<b>1</b> Introduction: a situation of complexity and heterogeneity .....	5
1.1 The policy and service landscape: from rhetoric to reality.....	7
<b>2</b> Multi-dimensional barriers .....	11
2.1 Structural and contextual .....	13
2.2 Personal.....	13
2.2.1 Skills.....	13
2.2.2 Psychological and cultural.....	14
2.3 Economic factors.....	16
2.4 Social and attitudinal .....	18
2.5 Informational obstacles .....	20
2.6 Policies, bureaucratic traps and limited rights .....	20
2.7 Institutional bottlenecks .....	22
2.8 Lacking or overstretched services and support .....	24
2.9 Lack of mentors .....	24
2.10 Media representations .....	25
<b>3</b> Recommendations.....	25

# 1. Introduction: a situation of complexity and heterogeneity

The need to focus on education is not a luxury or superfluous and, like any other country in the EU, Malta hosts an increasing number of migrants. From EU migrants and third country nationals coming to study or work to those seeking asylum and refuge from conflict, environmental disasters, or poverty, over the past years, Malta has seen migration become a solid piece of its new reality. As in most EU countries, in Malta, at least 5% of school age children and adolescents are foreign born<sup>1</sup>. With this ‘new’ reality, comes a new set of demands and requirements, often challenging the narrative and system previously known.

Before moving forward, it is important to state that any discussion on education is not easy nor is it straightforward, and it would be grossly erroneous to simplify or generalise. Education is complex and expansive, and includes informal, non-formal, and formal education. Many of the specialised provisions for migrants in Malta might be classified as informal and non-formal, while the formal education system would imply compulsory education (including primary and secondary), post-secondary and tertiary, the latter including vocational training and university<sup>2</sup>. Needless to say, this trajectory covers a lengthy period of time, from childhood through to adolescence and adulthood. As will become evident in this report, the bulk of references

to education that emerged from the conference were focused on formal education, in particular that pertinent to young adults. References to the need to address language and literacy and orientation on life in Malta would normally be addressed through non-formal education (state agencies and NGOs).

From the outset in debates, it was clear that education is a key area that needs prioritising in discussion, but in particular in policies and practice, not least in its important role in integration<sup>3</sup>. Even though much of the discussion was dominated by a focus on the multiple barriers faced by a range of migrant learners, these barriers, it was clear, need to be understood and carefully addressed because education is important and perceived to serve multiple functions traversing a range of life spheres. These include:

- Education as a tool of integration and participation: education is a critical platform not only for learning and sharing, but to also feel and be part of a society and community, and to contribute to it.
- Employability: the connections between education and employment are well established<sup>4,5</sup>, notably that education can lead to and open possibilities to better employment. Participants, though, were quick to express that education may not necessarily lead

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1 UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM (2019) Access to education for refugee and migrant children in Europe. Rome

2 See <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sdg-goal-4#:~:text=The%20agenda%20contains%2017%20goals,and%20three%20means%20of%20implementation>.

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3 European Commission (2017) Working Group seminar on the integration of migrants, Brussels, 28 March 2017. Brussels: EC

4 See EC (2017).

5 Eurostat (2020) Europe 2020 indicators – education. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/29305.pdf>

to better employment opportunities, when broader social, cultural and other dimensions and obstacles, including racism, are not addressed.

- State obligation: governments have a mandate to ensure human rights and legal obligations are expedited. Indeed, all individuals (including beneficiaries of international protection) are entitled to and have the right to education, which is valued and prioritised as a condition for the full realization of other human rights<sup>6</sup>.
- Social connectedness: education is a pillar of social boundedness and inclusion, as well as a source of social capital.
- Means of learning cultural aspects and dimensions, in this case including about the host country, while host country learners are able to learn about the lives and realities of migrants.
- The impacts of fragmented or no access to education have featured with frequency in research on migrant learners, especially refugees and asylum seekers, including increased vulnerability to abuse, employment barriers, exploitative working conditions, insecurity, and overall, constrained ability to rebuild lives, return and/or contribute<sup>7</sup>.

The situation as reported in the conference and pre-conference is one that is rather problematic, but also hard to capture, and indeed one can hardly generalise or simplify the situation of all migrant learners<sup>8</sup>. If there was one key point that emerged, even subliminally, was confusion about ‘which migrant’ we are talking about,

whether it is asylum seekers; EU migrants; third country nationals; international students and so on. This was no surprise, though, given that the migrant population is as complex as it is heterogeneous<sup>9</sup>. Various dimensions mean that situations, needs and demands are diverse and also dynamic (that is changing and not static) and cannot easily be encapsulated, simplified or generalised, or one-size-fits-all solutions sought. All of these approaches become not only problematic per se, but also negate the differences as well as agency of the migrant population in their full and complex spectrum. The various dimensions that articulate and reflect this heterogeneity include:

- Country of provenance and region
- How long the person has resided in the host country
- Race and ethnic identity (these become critical markers of difference)
- Gender
- Age
- Level of literacy
- Language capabilities, especially English
- Cultural and ideological background
- Location of residence in Malta (e.g. open centre) determining level of physical isolation and contact as well as impacting perceptions of others
- Educational background
- Familiarity with context and systems used locally
- Family background, level of family poverty etc.
- Presence of family and type of family support
- Ability to use technology and seek information effectively and use this for educational purposes
- Support of friends and community, including with figuring out the system

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6 UNESCO (2017) Protecting the right to education for refugees. Rome: UNESCO

7 See Ramsay, G. and Baker, S. (2019) Higher Education and Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Meta Scoping Study. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 38(1), 55–82.

8 Grech, S. (2019) Connected learning in the higher education of refugees. Malta: Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning.

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9 King, R. and Lulle, A. (2016) *Research on Migration: Facing Realities and Maximising Opportunities*. Brussels: EC.

- Economic situation, including poverty
- Presence of young dependents, disabled family members and so on, that may constitute pressures on economic costs as well as time for caregiving<sup>10</sup>

These are only some of the dimensions that highlight the deep diversity of the migrant population, but which serve to illustrate how an education strategy, the opportunities and barriers and multiple other dimensions cannot be simplified or easily addressed, and that while talk and documents can come cheap, genuinely addressing problems with the rigour and sensitivity they deserve, requires information, resources and commitment over the long term. This was the main message in the conference.

### **1.1 The policy and service landscape: from rhetoric to reality**

International policies and organisations have stepped up the focus on the education of migrants, notably refugees in recent years, intensified by increases in refugee numbers, as well as the increasingly protracted situations they face. This focus is not unwarranted, given that migrants, notably third country nationals, refugees and asylum seekers face inordinate barriers and fare worse than EU learners overall<sup>11</sup>, also because migration itself may interrupt education, especially in the case of children and youth. Education has also come

to be increasingly mentioned in talk and policies on integration, as a means and also an end<sup>12</sup>. Overall, and as a result of this, policies and declarations mentioning education directly or indirectly have increased<sup>13</sup>. A major initiative over the past years has been the Global Compact on Refugees<sup>14</sup>, in 2018, in which 193 States affirmed their commitment to increased solidarity and cooperation with refugees and host countries. Included within the Compact is also a section on education emphasising commitment ‘to facilitate access by refugee and host community children (both boys and girls), adolescents and youth to primary, secondary and tertiary education’ (13) through direct investment in financial and human resources as well as concerted efforts at removing obstacles to enrolment and attendance. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), dedicate a whole section to education through SDG4 devoted to ensuring ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030. While there is no mention of refugees or undocumented migrants, there is some attention to ‘vulnerable’ children as well as disabled people. More recently, the European Commission too, set up an Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals<sup>15</sup>, establishing a framework

<sup>10</sup> For more on these and other factors and processes, see also: Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2018) Immigrant background and expected early school leaving in Europe: evidence from PISA. Luxembourg: JRC

<sup>11</sup> EC (2016) Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions: Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals. Brussels: EC.

<sup>12</sup> European University Association (EUA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019) Higher education for third country national and refugee integration in southern Europe: TandEM - Towards Empowered Migrant Youth in Southern Europe. Geneva: IOM.

<sup>13</sup> See Subsidiary Legislation 217.01: Status of Long-Term Residents (Third Country Nationals Regulations) for more on the broader policy landscape.

<sup>14</sup> UN (2018) Report of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees: Global Compact on Refugees. New York: UN

<sup>15</sup> European Commission (2016). Communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals. COM(2016) 377 final.

for supporting actions on integration as well as measures the European Commission itself is implementing. Formal education is seen as one of the key factors contributing to integration and is hence one of the five policy priorities under the Plan, including measures such as upskilling at all education levels and for language learning. Other initiatives include the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC, Council of Europe Treaty No.165)<sup>16</sup>, working to provide a legal framework for the recognition of higher education qualifications and of periods of study. All but one EU Member State have signed and ratified this<sup>17</sup>.

Education has featured in some policies over the past 15 or so years in Malta too, addressing directly or indirectly the education of migrants in the country alongside a small number of initiatives. For example, the policy document titled 'A national literacy strategy for all in Malta and Gozo: 2014-2019', published by the Ministry for Education and Employment<sup>18</sup>, placed some attention on migrant children in schools and the need to reassess the education system and how it attends to the needs of third country nationals, including measures such as a small number of language classes and schooling options for migrant parents alongside literacy classes. In 2015, a framework document published by the Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties, titled 'Toward a National Migrant Integration Strategy: 2015-2020'<sup>19</sup>, sought to 'support efforts that enable third country

nationals (TCNs) of diverse national, economic, social, cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds to fulfil the conditions of residence and to facilitate their integration within Maltese society'. This was also intended to provide the basis for the National Migrant Integration Strategy. The very first national strategy, titled 'Integration=Belonging'<sup>20</sup>, was subsequently launched in 2017. It claims to provide for the mainstreaming of a 'migrant integration perspective...in all sectors, such as education, employment, health, social services and other sectors, and at all levels and stages' (p. 8). The 'I Belong' Programme<sup>21</sup> within this strategy, subsequently introduced in 2018, claims to 'provide a holistic approach to integration'. The integration itinerary within this strategy provides for 2 stages. The first stage is the 'pre-integration certificate', whereby EU nationals, TCNs and other migrants are eligible to apply for: 1. Accredited Maltese language for integration classes (MQF Level 1-20 hours) (offered by MCAST, unless applicant is already certified by MQRIC); 2. Accredited English language for integration classes (MQF Level 1-20 hours) (offered by MCAST, unless applicant is already certified by MQRIC); 3. Cultural orientation (MQF Level 1-20 hours) (offered by MCAST to all applicants); and 4. A record and assessment of qualifications, trade, work experience and skills. It is also open to beneficiaries of international protection and offers English and Maltese language courses and basic cultural and societal orientation as part of the integration process. Integration requests are accepted from all persons of migrant background regardless of

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16 [https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/165/signatures?p\\_auth=ABNZJKC8](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/165/signatures?p_auth=ABNZJKC8)

17 See also EC (2019) The contribution of youth work in the context of migration and refugee matters: A practical toolbox for youth workers and recommendations for policymakers. Results of the expert group set up under the European Union work plan for youth for 2016-2018. Brussels: EC

18 <https://education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf>

19 [https://meae.gov.mt/en/public\\_consultations/msdc/documents/2015%20-%20integration/msd\\_report%20booklet\\_jf\\_rev4.pdf](https://meae.gov.mt/en/public_consultations/msdc/documents/2015%20-%20integration/msd_report%20booklet_jf_rev4.pdf)

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20 Ministry for European Affairs and Equality (2017) Integration=Belonging: Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan. Malta

21 <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Pages/Intercultural%20and%20Anti-Racism%20Unit/I-Belong-Courses.aspx>

their grounds of residence. Each course requires at least 80% attendance and a set pass mark (50%) in order to receive a certificate.

The second stage is the 'integration certificate' which is one of the requirements for long-term residence status for TCNs, whereby migrants can apply for 1. Accredited Maltese language for integration classes (MQF Level 2-50 hours) (offered by University of Malta and MCAST, unless applicant is already certified by MQRIC); and 2. Cultural and societal orientation (MQF Level 2-120 hours) (offered by the University of Malta and MCAST to all applicants). A 65% pass mark is required to receive the Maltese Language for Integration and an 80% attendance and 75% pass mark is required in order to receive the Cultural Orientation Certificate. Applicants are awarded a certificate upon successful completion of the courses.

Another initiative has been the setting up of The Migrant Learners' Unit<sup>22</sup> within the Ministry for Education, tasked with promoting the inclusion of newly arrived learners into the education system, while offering support such as basic language to compensate that in class.

Over the past years, there have been a number of other initiatives aimed at supporting students, in particular with language support. Other schemes, such as Skills Kit introduced at MCAST, while not specifically directed at migrants, offers courses available also to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

Initiatives such as these are compensated by NGOs and other stakeholders. For example, Blue Door English (set up and run by St. Andrew's Church) offers English language classes, shouldering substantial responsibility for these lessons, and with long waiting lists (see below).

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22 <https://migrantlearnersunit.gov.mt/en/Pages/About%20us/about-us.aspx>

Efforts such as these are compensated by others such as Integra Foundation, the latter providing free lessons in English and Maltese. Integra and Spark 15 are also working with the University of Malta to prepare potential students for the IELTS exam and to facilitate access to university<sup>23</sup>; UNHCR recently paired up with Coursera<sup>24</sup> offering free online courses for refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and asylum seekers in Malta, a programme with multiple universities participating. The courses are free and once the course is downloaded, it can be accessed offline, to account for connectivity issues.

However, and overall, it is clearly evident that integration measures lack a clear concerted strategy, investment, political commitment, monitoring and evaluation, and that, in turn, education is affected too. The panel speaker from UNHCR, for example, commented how despite the fact that their short courses are free, uptake in Malta remains particularly low. Contributions from participants and a scanning of literature highlight some common threads and indeed a rather grim situation in regard to education, marred by illiteracy, low access, low levels of achievement and high levels of attrition among others<sup>25, 26</sup>. Overall, integration is not happening, not least because students stop at a certain point, either because the system is not serving them well, or because other priorities take over, or because necessary support is not there. Overall, as we try and map the educational

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23 See Galea, P. and Kanteh. B. (2018) Spark 15 – a refugee youth-led organisation. In Pisani, M. et al. (Eds.) *Between Insecurity and Hope: Reflections on youth work with young refugees*. Council of Europe and European Commission

24 <https://www.coursera.org/refugees>

25 EC (2016); King and Lulle (2016); European University Association (EUA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019);

26 OECD and European Union. (2015). *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015: Settling In*. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234024-en>

landscape, a number of points become evident, and which were substantiated during the conference:

- Data is scarce and/or at best fragmented, which means that advocacy tools are diluted, including reliable statistics
- Barriers to education are numerous, rife, interconnected and traverse numerous dimensions (see below)
- These barriers are pronounced not only in accessing, but also in sustaining and completing education. As will be highlighted, basic and urgent needs, and the need to attend to these (covering the basic costs of living and survival), often compete with those of education. Almost invariably, and understandably so, education as highlighted in other literature and research, has to be placed on the back burner in the bid to survive (practical needs take over strategic ones)<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, drop-out rates are high and migrant learners are often pushed to stop at a certain point, not out of lack of will or ability, but because interwoven barriers conspire, including unexpected demands (on time, finances, etc.). This is a worrying pattern within a country with one of the highest early school leaver (ESL) rates (20%) in Europe<sup>28</sup>.
- For those who manage to continue their education, this often does not translate into jobs that match the level and skill base of the person, resulting in a disincentive for others to try and move forward with their education if this may not pay off (better job, working conditions etc.).
- Problems transcend the personal and political, to

include cultural processes, notably racism and other disabling barriers that provide context and also the basis for persistence of these barriers. Integration remains a far cry.

- Related to this is the absence of a coherent and informed integration strategy that should have been in place years ago, manifesting that the roots of the problem remain firmly grounded in institutionalised views of the migrant as a transitory one, at best not here to stay, and at worst, a ‘problem’ that needs to be removed.
- Formal education is the key focus: conversations between participants were more focused on formal education in schools or university and to a lesser extent MCAST, leaving out almost entirely informal or nonformal education or vocational training. This may have been conditioned by those attending, but is an important finding in itself, highlighting the need for education to be bound to some or other certification, and to connect with the job market, representing a rather traditional view of education, which as literature suggests, may not be quite the case in practice<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> See also Grech (2019)

<sup>28</sup> Joint Research Centre (JRC) (2018) Immigrant background and expected early school leaving in Europe: evidence from PISA. Luxembourg: JRC

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<sup>29</sup> See King and Lulle (2016)

## 2. Multi-dimensional barriers

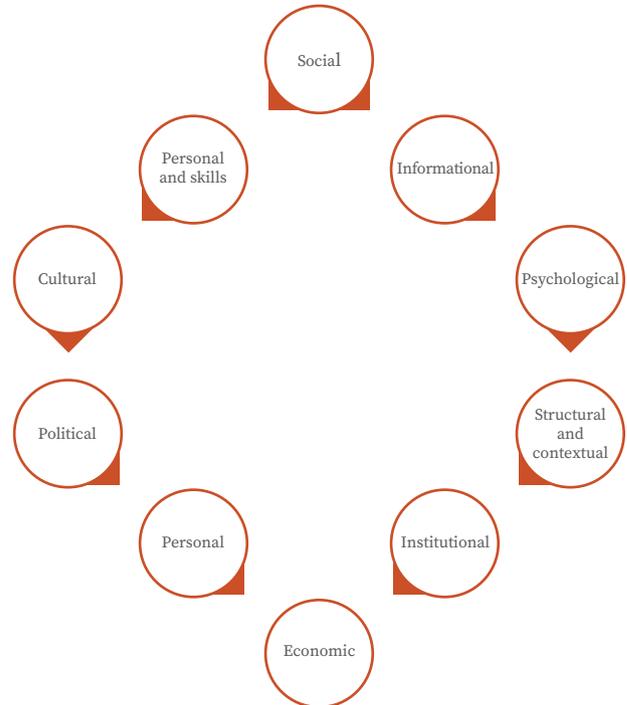
The range of problems are complex, dynamic and interconnected and comprise structural and institutional, legal, personal, informational, social, economic, cultural, political, organisational (and support), and other dimensions (see Figure 1). The implication is that any understanding of these has to critically engage with the intersection between the individual, institution, and context (see Figure 2). As the arrows in Figure 1 below highlight, these barriers are dynamic, that is are not static, and can and change over space and time, for example when the personal circumstances of the person or his/her family change (e.g. greater levels of poverty, health care problems, unemployment, rising living costs etc.). Social barriers may intensify for example when the person moves to a more isolated geographical area. It is also important to note that these barriers are not sequential. Instead, they interact and one shifts the other, with the implication that they cannot quite be understood in isolation, and indeed as will become evident later in the report, require interventions on multiple fronts.

The barriers are outlined over the next sub-sections.

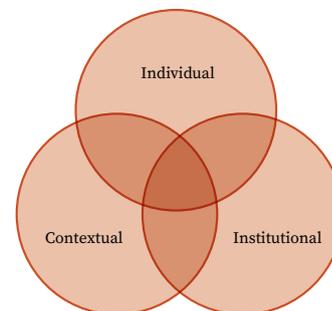
### 2.1 Structural and contextual

The first key point that needs addressing here is indeed the powerful structural and contextual forces that migrant learners, some more than others, have to deal with. One cross-cutting theme that emerged in the conference, notably in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, was the physical living conditions, where these places are located, what they represent, and critically, if and how they permit any form of integration in the first

**Figure 1:** Multidimensional and interacting barriers



**Figure 2:** Overlaying barriers



place. Indeed, the journey of refugees and asylum seekers is rough. From detention to the physical isolation in open centres, to living in depressed areas in dilapidated buildings, the result is not only suffering and undignified living, but also isolation and ghettoization<sup>30</sup>. Importantly, as a number of participants commented, they become isolated subjects in the psyche of others, outcasts meant to be kept far away – they are therefore constructed as a symbolic problem too. The places that host them, including open centres, as one participant stressed, are effectively ‘a monument to exclusion’, and this exclusion dissipates into the educational sphere too. Rather than being constructed as students, people able and wanting to integrate, they are perpetually represented as outsiders. Their own poverty, and where they are forced to live, becomes something of their own making, and not the result of a context that does not provide and support as it should.

Even more basically, these spaces are not only ill-equipped when it comes to basic safety, hygiene, and dignified living, but also connectivity such as WIFI is absent, sparse or unreliable (e.g. in open centres). It also means perpetual insecurity, not being able to develop any roots, not feeling comfortable to seek information and so on.

## 2.2 Personal

Participants discussed with frequency the personal circumstances and situations that different migrants face as well as skills they have (or lack), and how these impact (directly or indirectly) their educational opportunities or otherwise. These become increasingly complex

when one factors in intersectional dimensions, e.g. age, gender, legal status, ethnicity, socio-economic level prior to migrating, length of time in Malta etc. among many others.

Two issues were raised with notably frequency: skills; and psychological aspects respectively.

### 2.2.1 Skills

Critical emerging issues on the skills front included:

- Illiteracy or semi-literacy: while statistics are scarce, feedback from the conference indicated that illiteracy is rife, especially among refugees and asylum seekers. This impacts if and how education is even considered a possibility at all if it does not address literacy needs. The urgency to work and simply survive together with time constraints, act as major disincentives to attend literacy classes, including on the basis of expenses (e.g. transportation) as well as fatigue.
- Language barriers: these constitute a major barrier and are well documented among many learners across contexts<sup>31</sup>. Participants in the conference stated that the majority (referring largely to asylum seekers) do not understand English or Maltese well, cannot speak these well enough, and/or cannot write proficiently in such languages. This situation is exacerbated and intensified by physical isolation, living in confined and isolated communities or open centres with little to no contact, and hence opportunity to interact and learn. These language barriers have dramatic effects, including difficulties in understanding information required, documentation, the application procedure, not to mention ability to access mainstream courses, follow in class as well as socialisation<sup>32</sup>.

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30 <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intdossier/immigrant-housing-in-europe-overview>; see also Fasadni, M. and Pisani, M. (2012) I'm not racist but... Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Groups and Housing in Malta - A Research Study. Malta: NCPE

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31 See UNESCO (2017)

32 See also Kopin (2015)

- Lack of IT skills: one observation was that IT skills are often limited or people may simply depend on the use of a smartphone, but then do not know how to use a PC as well as software such as Zoom or Teams etc. now commonly used in education, especially during crises such as COVID-19. This affects students in how they access and also sustain education. The lack of IT skills may also affect the incentive to try and obtain an education in the first place.

### 2.2.2 Psychological and cultural

Each migrant has a different journey and a different story, and indeed, psychological factors, including mental health have come to dominate much literature, especially that focusing on refugees and asylum seekers<sup>33</sup>. A recent systematic review, for example, reported a prevalence of 43% for posttraumatic stress disorder, 40% for depression, and 26% for anxiety among 8,176 Syrian refugees resettled in 10 countries<sup>34</sup>. The psychological dimension was in fact mentioned with substantial frequency, particularly in the way it also impacts willingness to engage, preparedness, and/or views about the returns on investment in education. Importantly, psychological factors, including attitudes, impact access to education as well as retention rates. These include:

- Culture shock: Physical isolation, including detention, living in Hal Far, or in places away from the mainstream population, means that key cultural and contextual aspects may not be easily learnt, out

of a lack of contact with others, making disassociation and isolation pervasive and intense, while impacting people psychologically, including a sense of shock when meeting the local context.

- Trauma: trauma and mental health problems including those related to posttraumatic stress disorder are key here, especially when in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, as participants noted, there is no time for healing, and when adequate (quantity, quality) and affordable (ideally free) psychological support is lacking. This is a serious situation when the latter is a critical precondition to starting and maintaining one's studies. Time constraints, too, not least the bid to simply survive, impact if and how psychological services can be accessed, if at all.
- Demotivation: participants mentioned demotivation at various junctures during the conference, resulting in a deep barrier in accessing education. Demotivation is spurred on numerous fronts, including (among others):
  - trying to understand and deal with a convoluted and bureaucratic system with lengthy procedures and inordinate demands on time and patience and lack of consistent support in navigating these procedures (see below).
  - walking out of detention and living in isolated areas, reinforcing the sense of otherness and rejection (see above).
  - the constant worry as to how to merely survive causes stress and anxiety and leaves little time or effort for anything else.
  - schools and educational institutions that are unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with the needs of migrant learners.

33 See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/10/5f7ec72a4/qa-pandemic-refugee-mental-health-severely-overlooked-its-full-blown-crisis.html>; Blackmore et al. (2020) The prevalence of mental illness in refugees and asylum seekers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS Medicine*, 17(9).

34 Peconga EK. Et al. (2019) Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety in adult Syrian refugees: what do we know? *Scand J Public Health*.

- poor job opportunities, especially those aligned with their level of education: this translates into lack of motivation to advance studies, when the work they will eventually find (if they do) may well have nothing to do with their studies or the level of education<sup>35</sup>.
- Transitional factor: Participants and the panel commented how Malta is for many migrants (notably refugees and asylum seekers) a transitional place (realistically or otherwise), who may feel it is a waste of time to invest in education when the future looks bleak, or may well be elsewhere. There is no incentive to invest in one place and in oneself, even if many may well be trapped in Malta for years. This situation is intensified by a concrete lack of concerted measures to work towards an effective integration policy.
- Feelings of inferiority: Differential treatment as well as lack of understanding by teachers (see below) means that migrant learners, especially children, are often overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy or even inferiority and shame, which in turn affects their performance<sup>36</sup>. Once again, this is intensified by the fact that these students are often seen as an addition to, rather than an integral part of, the student cohort and the educational system, which should be designed around and accommodate their educational, cultural and other needs too.
- Cultural dimensions and beliefs: one teacher

commented how it is difficult to discuss certain issues when some migrant learners come with their own beliefs, including homophobia or resistance when it comes to issues such as sexual orientation or sex. In turn, sensitive topics are not easy to address and skills are needed to neither offend nor overwhelm. This same teacher observed how children may even gang up as a result of homophobia. She also commented how parents often do not help, when it comes to their own beliefs and what they impart with their children, adding an extra layer of resistance. Gender issues cropped up in the conversation too, highlighting how women teachers are sometimes treated with disrespect by some migrant children, for example students not looking these teachers in the eye, a product of gender-based differences as well as misogyny they witness within their own families. This teacher also commented how some parents who did not value education as much as others, used the option of not sending children to school during COVID-19 as a basis for not sending their children back to school or only intermittently, resulting in a cycle of educational interruptions.

Overall, it is important to note, though, that the nuances and intersections between these skills and also psychological and cultural dimensions were not adequately or substantially discussed during the conference, which means that it is difficult to draw any conclusions as to how these operate in practice and the extent to which they impact different populations and sub-populations. This will need further research.

### **2.3 Economic factors**

The most important barrier that cuts across most of the others, and which ultimately determines whether

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35 King and Lulle (2016), similarly report how for example the traditional markers of tertiary education being equated with highly skilled jobs is becoming increasingly blurred. They note how tertiary education is not a guarantee of certain jobs, and does not ensure skills required by the job market. Overall, as it stresses, education 'does not predict what happens during and after migration'.

36 See also Cerna (2019) Refugee education: integration models and practices in OECD countries OECD. Education Working Paper No. 203. France: OECD.

education is a possibility at all, is the economic one. More specifically, education, even if school is free, is not without its costs<sup>37</sup>. This is critical for parts of the migrant community that are not only struggling economically, but are living in poverty, and whereby survival itself may often be easily compromised even with marginal stresses and shocks. This is especially the case for asylum seekers and refugees, and more recently also third country nationals whose livelihoods have been negatively impacted during COVID-19<sup>38</sup>. It is a known fact that many refugees and asylum seekers are facing chronic poverty, their resources are limited, the work they perform is unstable and precarious<sup>39</sup>, and most of their lives are devoted to trying to survive, and are hence constantly subjugated to the pressure to earn<sup>40</sup>. Malta is no different. From poorly paid, erratic and often exploitative work to rising living costs, especially those of rent, much of the migrants' life is devoted to securing basic needs within a system that does not ensure that social protection is adequate and importantly consistent and strong enough to enable them to weather shocks. Education therefore comes to compete with such costs, including on time, especially for those with young dependents. The priority, it is clear, is to work, make money and send something back home if possible, at all. One student participant commented how education is often interrupted by the need to help family, whether they are here in Malta or not.

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37 UNHCR (2016) Global Education Monitoring Report. No more excuses: Provide education to all forcibly displaced people, Policy Paper 26

38 See <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-what-you-need-know-about-refugees-education> for more the impacts of COVID 19 on education.

39 OECD (2020) What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children?. OECD

40 UNHCR (n.d.) Background Guide: Access to Education for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/5df9f1767.pdf>

Understandably, survival takes priority, but educators and the institution are often not tolerant of such responses, he commented, that is that interruptions are borne of necessity and not out of lack of commitment or desire to learn. Participants in the conference reiterated how for many, there is also too much fatigue after a day of work to then attend a course twice a week on top of that, to be in full time education and/or juggling jobs too. They also discussed how poverty has an emotional and psychological dimension too, whereby worry and feelings of insecurity are relentless, which in turn affects if and how education is approached (if at all).

For young students, the stipend system is also unclear and unfair at best. One student who was interviewed, commented how now on his last year doing his degree at MCAST, he still hasn't figured out how the stipend system works. He described years of being thrown from one administrator to another because no one seems to know what to do in the case of migrant learners and to the day he is still with no stipend.

Another critical barrier related to the economic dimension, is the costs involved in education itself, especially in postsecondary and tertiary education. Third country nationals in Malta may be paying up to EUR11,000 simply in tuition<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, while third country nationals can access the same courses and training as locals, the costs are what set these apart. Third country nationals have to pay for courses offered by the Directorate for Lifelong Learning which would normally be free for Maltese and EU citizens or offered at a subsidized rate. MCAST and University courses too come at a cost. It is important to note that in the latter cases, exemptions can

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41 European University Association (EUA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019)

be made when it comes to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. However, and as has been noted, fragmented information means that potential students may not always know about these, or how to go about applying, also because they may lack support in doing so. Overall, though, studying is not free, even if schooling and/or tuition may be. Students need money to buy books, uniforms, software, a laptop, have a good and reliable connection, and to cover transportation costs among others<sup>42</sup>. The young student interviewed above also spoke about the need to be able to buy casual clothes in a post-secondary and tertiary environment where looks become important and also fodder for bullying, to which migrant learners are particularly vulnerable. Importantly, they need to be free from the urgent pressure to work relentlessly to simply be able to pull through. With few to no means of financial support, including a start-up loan for post-secondary or tertiary students, the costs paired with the lack of economic means and time, make education an impossibility for many, or may be interrupted.

Within schools, while children are supported through Scheme 9 (e.g. free food, photocopies etc.), there are still barriers when it comes, for example, to technology. One teacher who was interviewed highlighted problems during COVID-19 when classes shifted online, speaking about families with multiple children who did not have a laptop for every child. She stated that she was still unclear as to what the scheme or government support is like in this regard, but that this definitely led to barriers for children including within the same family.

## **2.4 Social and attitudinal**

The barriers confronted in education emanate from broader social and attitudinal ones. Racism, xenophobia, and discrimination have been and continue to be the subject of much literature on migration in Malta<sup>43</sup>, and both are indeed on the rise. Racism merits particular attention, not least because it determines social responses, opportunities and challenges and whether these can be tackled, especially without effective policy and education. Participants in the conference spoke about discrimination resulting from what they believe is racism within learning institutions. These include lack of accommodations to make sure that migrant learners have the same possibilities to access and sustain education as others; and the near absence of willingness to make reasonable adjustments within the curriculum as well as approach in teaching. This racism and discrimination, participants stressed, extends to the world of employment, especially when one cannot find a job that matches one's level of education, or is treated unfairly (e.g. paid less), which feeds back into the view that education may not pay off after all, if these attitudinal barriers are not dealt with.

One student at MCAST noted how xenophobia extended to peers, recounting how even at degree level, he would have problems in joining study groups because half of the group (predominantly Maltese) would not want him to join, no reasons given. He went on to explain how he believed that the insular context in which they are raised in Malta by their parents must play a key role, resulting in this irrational fear of the

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42 See Grech (2019)

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43 See Pisani, M. et al. (2015) *My Diversity: Age, Gender and Diversity Perspectives in the Maltese Refugee Context*. Malta: UNHCR & Integra;

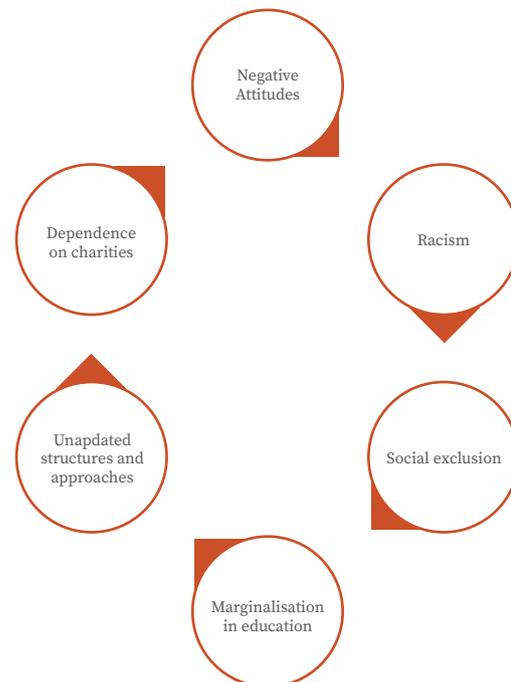
foreigner, stereotypes and plain ignorance, manifested on a daily basis. Teachers and lecturers too may not be aware or alert either. This same student told of how one teacher went on to show a movie that was blatantly racist, including black slaves, and did not for a second consider if or how this would have offended migrant learners in class, especially when no context was provided.

A teacher who was interviewed recounted multiple instances of open racism and xenophobia among other teachers within her school, including superiors targeting students they called 'Arabs', an indiscriminate group as it seemed, encapsulating quite a few people, a term that is used and loaded with racist connotations. What was even more worrying, as she recounted, was that such behaviour and expressions were almost normalized and came with no repercussions. She told of an incident where a superior was speaking on a microphone to all teachers stating that 'all the problems in the school are caused by these Arabs', leading to a round of applause instead of any disciplinary measures. She spoke of what she described as 'profound ignorance' alongside lack of cultural knowledge and education, especially among older teachers not used to teaching in a multicultural context and for whom the increased number of migrant learners is a cause for distress and resistance rather than a welcome opportunity for learning and interaction that can ultimately benefit all students.

This same teacher went on to highlight how barriers are enacted even between children themselves, stating how children from the same country generally only hang around with each other. While this may be a means of seeking familiarity and comfort in an unfamiliar context, at times it also leads to resistance and discrimination towards children from other countries or even cultures and religions.

Notably, and as was frequently manifest in the conference, racism and negative attitudes lead to social exclusion and marginalization, with the implication that a bulk of the migrant population, notably asylum seekers are isolated from mainstream social activities, and this includes migrant children. As a consequence, the migrant learner remains a perpetual outsider on the fringes of education and of society. Even more basically, if these attitudes prevail within formal institutions, a number of participants reflected, the result is that it reinforces dependence on charities to fill these gaps. This triggers a whole other cycle, maintaining formal education unprepared and unadapted to the needs of migrant learners (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** The cycle of discrimination and educational marginalisation



An important point that emerged too, was that trying to shift these attitudes and beliefs among teachers in particular deserves attention, because anything perceived as 'extra' training is seen as imposed and is then resisted by teachers, with the implication that unless areas such as cultural education are adequately addressed in their teaching course, then opportunities become increasingly limited when they are working.

## 2.5 Informational obstacles

Informational bottlenecks, complexities and delays were uttered as major concerns throughout the conference, supporting ample literature<sup>44</sup>. These barriers are multiple and cut across areas:

- Quantitative and qualitative lack of information: A number of participants commented how information is often lacking, including about what opportunities and courses are available, where to seek support, what the requirements are, about the stipend system (if any) and so on; information is lacking both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is not only in regard to education, but also other bureaucratic processes such as citizenship, applications etc. This leads migrants to rely on their community of origin to help them find out the required documents, a job and a house, and possibly even education, contributing to the isolation of the groups, but also to a system whereby information obtained may not be precise or sufficient.
- Confusing system: Indeed, and even more critically, information is often convoluted, spread over multiple

sources or across entities, is complex to process (if not unclear) and also costly (especially in time) to obtain. It was emphasised how there is no one comprehensive portal of information, backed by the lack of a comprehensive integration policy (within which this would fall too). Indeed, deciphering what is available, where, the requirements etc. including where services offered by NGOs are, is taxing and convoluted, especially for those who may not speak English, do not have adequate access to internet, and/or are lacking contact with possible sources of information (e.g. NGOs, mentors etc.) or do not have access to a supporting family or community (e.g. to assist with translation or to explain). Even when there are favourable conditions such as fee exemptions, they may not know about them or how or who can help with a letter to obtain these. This becomes even more complex when people walk out of detention or open centres and do not know what is around them, navigating a system and context that is totally alien and daunting.

- Unadapted language: even when courses may be available, and there can be information, this is not always culturally adapted and may be complex and unintelligible to a range of different populations and is also not translated into multiple languages, making it difficult to process linguistically, but also culturally.
- Unclear link between schools and the Migrant Learners' Unit: one teacher expressed how despite the important work done by the Unit, this was not exactly known among teachers and schools, and there was no interface between the Unit and the schools themselves, with the implication that things and services are often found by accident.

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<sup>44</sup> See EASO (2020) EASO Asylum Report 2020: Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union. Malta: EASO; European University Association (EUA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019)

## The length and intensity of government bureaucracy is so rife and lacking functional logic, that it is seen as a major obstacle to education, and overall to starting some or other process of integration



### 2.6 Policies, bureaucratic traps and limited rights

If there was one common theme that was mentioned with frequency, that was bureaucracy, including laws and regulations perceived as non-sensical, such as those on registration. For example, EU registration laws, participants stressed, are hugely problematic, since if a refugee or asylum seeker is registered elsewhere (e.g. in Italy), then he/she is stuck with that country, and cannot access services in Malta (Dublin Convention)<sup>45</sup>. This is dramatically problematic given the movement of people. Other laws that impinge on migrant learners include those related to third country nationals, requiring them to meet rather stringent and demanding economic criteria to be able to study in Malta. This has been further affected by the global pandemic and its impact on livelihoods.

One of the most discussed problems, though, were the delays in the processing of asylum and citizenship applications. The length and intensity of government bureaucracy is so rife and lacking functional logic, that it is seen as a major obstacle to education, and overall

to starting some or other process of integration. The entry for Malta in the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) noted how, in 2018 and 2019, ‘access to education for unaccompanied children was significantly hindered as a consequence of delays in the registration of asylum applications’<sup>46, 47</sup>. For others, the long-winded procedure of obtaining residence permits is worsened by language barriers and inadequate and insufficient support services (e.g. translation). The consequence is that it makes it increasingly arduous for third country nationals to seek and start working and/or apply for family reunification, hence negatively impacting the process of integration into Maltese society<sup>48</sup>. This situation is exacerbated and intensified by negative attitudes towards migrants, which is reflected in the ‘lack of will to help people understand the administrative machine’<sup>49</sup> or to make sure it is easy enough to navigate by everyone. Others also commented how procedures such as the recognition of certificates from country of origin still remains complex and

45 For more on the contentious terrain of citizenship, see Pisani, M. (2012) Addressing the ‘Citizenship Assumption’ in Critical Pedagogy: Exploring the Case of Rejected Female Sub-Saharan African Asylum Seekers in Malta. *Power and Education*, 4(2)

46 <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education>

47 See also JRS Malta, Aditus Foundation and Integra Foundation (2018) *On being moved: Refugee perceptions of being relocated to Malta*. Malta: JRS, Aditus and Integra.

48 Kopin (2015) *Adult migrant education in Malta*. Malta: Kopin

49 Kopin (2015)

sometimes slow, acting as an effective barrier<sup>50</sup>.

Policies and bureaucracy were indeed the topic of frequent discussion. Participants noted how rights are ultimately limited when migrants have no voting rights. Their needs are not prioritized.

One tertiary student participant who was interviewed also spoke about the ordeal of not receiving benefits because his mother was receiving benefits and he resided in the same household – a ridiculous policy where benefits are bound to household and residence. As a full time student, and also without a stipend, it left absolutely no money for his studies, to the extent that he had to move out, pay some EUR25 for a change of address, and find a friend to register in another house in an effort to be entitled to social benefits and circumvent a disabling system that would have ended his studies. He stressed how finding someone to host him and to have a registered place of residence is by no means an easy thing.

To round off this section, it is not only migrants who do not know what the policies are, but also schools. They do not know where to refer children needing specific help, or what is available. Teachers, too, are often bogged down by constant policy changes in programmes, assessments and so on, which makes it hard for them to focus on or address other issues. This acts as a very insidious barrier.

## 2.7 Institutional bottlenecks

Institutions, from schools to higher education institutions, are hardly prepared and geared to accommodate migrant

learners and provide quality, timely and responsive education sensitive and alert to the heterogeneity and complexity of the migrant population. At an institutional level, long-winded bureaucratic processes and policies impact the educational journey too. The application process is complex, much is online, takes a long time, and there is little support with filling in application forms etc. which is indeed a major hurdle. While a small number of NGOs do provide support on the latter, this support is limited and can hardly cope with the demand. Reliance on one's own community is not always sufficient or the right kind of help required, some participants commented. One participant also highlighted how institutions often do not even know the difference between the different ID cards and basic asylum procedures, which means that administratively they remain perpetually ill-equipped to the detriment of the students.

The functioning and internal workings of schools in particular were a frequent subject within discussions. A number of issues were pronounced:

- School system is too centralized, so schools have no individual authority or autonomy to decide what they need in different localities and how to go about things e.g. teachers in one particular school may not necessarily need to speak Maltese, which would open the door to migrant teachers. Unfortunately, this is not possible because of one-size-fits-all policies and regulations.
- Lack of interest and knowledge: participants highlighted how teachers may have little to no interest in cultural dimensions within their teaching, and have no will or desire to learn. Many teachers, they felt, do not understand the needs and circumstances of migrant children, including the challenges they

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<sup>50</sup> The task of recognizing qualifications in Malta rests with the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), through the Qualifications Recognition and Information Centre (QRIC).

**participants mentioned lack of interest in cultural diversity as a major factor contributing to marginalisation, including the lack of understanding and valuation of cultural diversity as a strength rather than a weakness or a hassle that one has to navigate in class**



face, their living conditions and those of their families, where they come from, what their lives are like in their own countries, the languages they speak etc. In sum, there is a mismatch between the lifeworld of students and that of teachers. Related to this, participants mentioned lack of interest in cultural diversity as a major factor contributing to marginalisation, including the lack of understanding and valuation of cultural diversity as a strength rather than a weakness or a hassle that one has to navigate in class. One teacher called out the profound ‘ignorance’ and lack of even basic geopolitical knowledge of many teachers, including not knowing about wars and conflict in countries like Libya, let alone awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder among children and the need to attend to this. She tied much of this lack of cultural knowledge also to xenophobia and racism, highlighting how it seems ok for many teachers to openly make generalizing statements such as ‘Libyan men beat up women’, with the implication that whatever information they are fed is filtered through such a lens. She spoke about times she even heard teachers tell a student ‘go back to your country’- comments that once again go unprobed and punished.

- Lack of training: it is evident that teachers in school, apart from lack of interest, also have scarce training in engaging and dealing with migrant students, including preparation, delivery, and support<sup>51</sup>. This is a critical problem and gap area. While participants were aware that some teachers really walk the extra mile to accommodate all students, they lack proper training as well as resources to do so effectively and inclusively, including by the Migrant Learners’ Unit. One student at MCAST commented about the discomfort felt in having to remind the teacher to please speak in English, especially when he was the only foreigner, something he said was a cause of discomfort and anxiety. He went on to also recount how other teachers have such a heavy Maltese accent that this makes the content in English unintelligible at various moments. One incident in particular demonstrated the stark absence of awareness of cultural differences, whereby one lecturer did not realise that Indians in class who were nodding did not mean ‘no’ and in fact meant ‘yes’ they were understanding, and the lecturer kept on asking why they were not understanding.

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<sup>51</sup> See also UNESCO (2017)

- Low quality teaching: the student who was interviewed reiterated how at degree level, there seemed to be no structure and flow in the lessons, gaps in information and overall teaching that was at best of very low quality. He recounted how a number of lecturers even refused to record their lessons on Teams during COVID-19 and notes were not updated, thinking that this was a way of physically having students connect. The student commented how the issue is that the institution seems to have no control over what individual lecturers do in class and how.
- Very few to no migrant teachers to mitigate this situation: the barriers to studying extend to potential teachers. Also, one of the major barriers is that to teach in any primary or secondary school, the policy is that one has to have Maltese as one of the languages, so this works as a strong barrier to having migrant teachers.
- Non-inclusive curriculum: the way the curriculum is built in schools in particular, fails to capture diversity in cultural backgrounds, heterogeneity among students, different learning needs, cultural backgrounds, different knowledges and so much more<sup>52</sup>. It was very evident from the debates that the curriculum is built for what are framed as ‘Maltese’ students, the assumption being they are born and raised in Malta in a traditional and narrow sense of the word. Even more basically, this situation is created and maintained by a perpetual (and erroneous) view that these ‘foreign’ students are transitory or temporary, with the implication that the curriculum rarely changes in the way it genuinely needs to.
- Limited tailor-made learning materials: despite the fact that different students have different backgrounds as well as learning needs and demands, materials are one-size-fits-all, and both approach as well as materials do not consider alternative methods and materials that can support different students in their learning. Overall, as participants commented, the content and approach do not necessarily promote adaptability or cohesion.
- Related to the above, dependence on writing, such as assignments at postsecondary and tertiary level become dramatic problems in the absence of consistent language support classes and alternatives, for example willingness to examine orally.

### **2.8 Lacking or overstretched services and support**

When formal institutions are not prepared or adapted to the needs of migrant learners, and do not ensure that no one is left out, the result is that civil society, notably NGOs have to try and fill the gap. From teaching English, literacy, support with navigating the convoluted legal and institutional system, to covering a portion of basic needs, NGOs are a critical source of support. However, they are also overstretched, operating with insufficient financial and material resources. Largely dependent on volunteers, the demand far outweighs the supply. The NGO Blue Door for example commented how they simply cannot cope with the demand for English language lessons and have a waiting list of 170 people, a demand boosted further by the recent arrival of Venezuelan asylum seekers.

Another issue that emerged was that there are few or no translation services, especially with less diffuse languages, with the implication that even understanding

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<sup>52</sup> See Falzon, Pisani and Cauchi (2012) Research Report: Integration in Education of Third Country Nationals. Malta: FES.

procedures, application processes and the such, becomes problematic.

Parental support, too, is limited, especially when parents themselves may have limited education, may not themselves understand English and therefore cannot even help with homework. In some cases, they may be illiterate too. Many parents may also be unable to help children when they themselves do not have any IT skills. This means a situation where there is scarce to no support for these families to be able to better support the education of their children. Overall, and an important point discussed by one teacher in particular, was that schools are not open to parents, there is limited engagement, and as she stated, they 'bank on parents staying away and not bothering the school'. Indeed, other than parents' day, there is little to no contact with parents of migrant learners, which would also help with education and imparting of information.

### **2.9 Lack of mentors**

Mentorship was a theme that emerged with frequency and is a subject gaining prominence in literature on migration<sup>53</sup>. In particular, it was clear that migrant learners often lack a mentor who can support and guide them 'from start to finish' as one participant put it, from understanding the educational system, navigating the application process, seeking support, negotiating cultural and contextual dimensions and so on. This, in turn, maintains the system confusing and arduous to navigate on one's own and basing oneself only on fragments of disparate information picked up along the way. While

MCAST provides a mentorship scheme, it is not migrant focused, and the mentors are stretched, at a ratio of 6 mentors to 100-150 students each. Furthermore, much of this mentorship is oriented towards the education itself, rather than the context around education, which can in practice impact it.

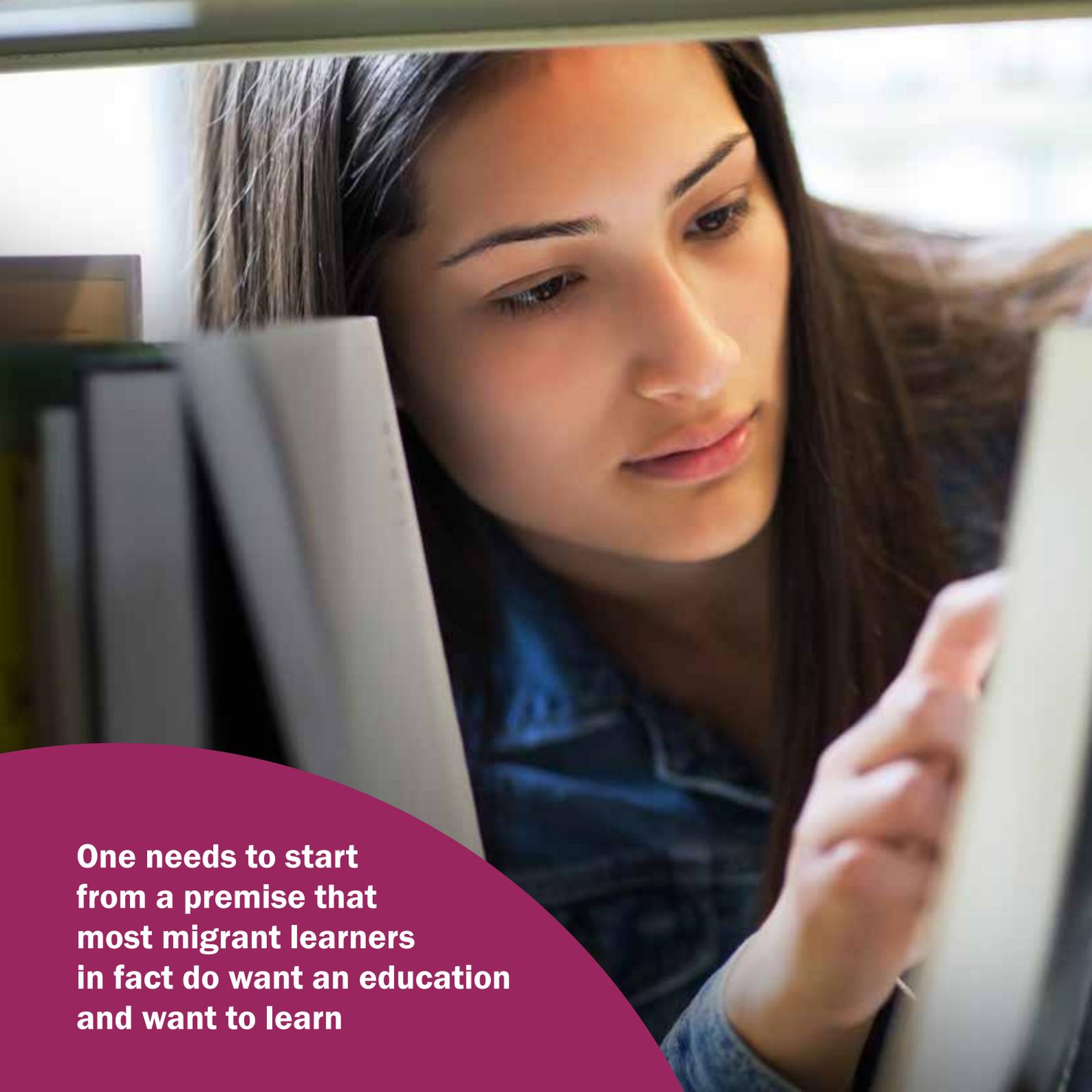
Apart from mentorship per se, participants highlighted at various points how migrant learners, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, lack local success stories of other migrants, ideally from their own community, who have been successful in education, then in work, and whose footsteps they can follow – in sum, someone they can look up to.

### **2.10 Media representations**

Finally, and cross-cutting the multiple barriers highlighted above, was the fact that media representations of migrants, especially asylum seekers and refugees act as effective dynamics inciting and maintaining processes of exclusion. Even more basically, as participants emphasised, they continuously pitch migrants as outsiders, not here to stay, temporary. In the meantime, public perceptions do not shift, integration remains a farfetched reality and systems and institutions perpetually unprepared. This is compensated by social media and comments on such platforms, including racist and xenophobic ones, which participants felt were a major obstacle and barrier to even starting to talk about integration, including in education.

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Atkinson, M. (2018). Refugee mentoring: Sharing the journey. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24(3), 338–342



**One needs to start from a premise that most migrant learners in fact do want an education and want to learn**

### 3. Recommendations

Panel speakers and participants discussed a number of ‘solutions’ to these problems, as well as the intersectional spaces in between. These are but recommendations, often realistic about the tightened barriers and the extent to which they can be achieved (or not). However, they do push the envelope of what migrant learners should be entitled to and even expect. In particular, they appear to press for almost a total redesigning of the formal education system and the strategy into one requiring flexibility and adaptability. As will be clear, recommendations cover primary, secondary and tertiary level:

- One needs to start from a premise that most migrant learners in fact do want an education and want to learn, but it is the system that does not allow for it. This requires change in discourse.
- Policies need to change in order for migrant learners to be able to access services like everyone else. One panel speaker stressed how in the case of tertiary education, it is not the university that is closing the door to asylum seekers, but it is the EU registration laws (Dublin). Policies, it was clear, need to be informed and in place to cater for future migrant learners in the country. This includes finding ways to counteract the tardiness in processing asylum applications and the unnecessary psychological stress it causes.
- A comprehensive national (or regional) strategy is needed, one incorporating the different sectors of education and training, to facilitate coordination and clearly assign roles and responsibilities with clear signposting for students, families and caregivers.
- Lobbying: this remains critical in reminding the government of commitments it has made, for example the Global Compact.
- It was suggested that the Migrant Learners’ Unit needs to have a clearer definition of roles, and these need to be known by schools in order to know if, how and when they can seek support. There also needs to be a liaison officer between the Unit and the schools, and the Unit needs more concrete human and financial resources to be able to service all the schools. As it stands, it is clear that the Unit is overwhelmed by the demand and the responsibilities and that its remit is very broad; yet, there is no shortage of goodwill and commitment to work effectively.
- Concise, adapted, sensitive information through a coherent and accessible portal: Information as noted above is required on a range of things, including courses (especially ones that are not well advertised or too visible), support and scholarships, processes of application and so on. Participants stressed how a ‘one stop shop’ portal of information would be very helpful in a context where information is often as scarce as it is fragmented, and consequently taxing and costly to obtain in entirety. This information would also need to be available in all languages, needs to be culturally adapted and sensitive, and clearly signposted especially for newly arrived migrants.
- Initial assessment: participants stressed the need for an initial assessment for refugees and asylum seekers as early as possible (ideally upon arrival) to check for

literacy, language skills etc. instead of having them thrown into a situation and context of limbo, with no services waiting. An initial assessment would speed the process of assessing needs, devising literacy and language programmes that are adapted and responsive, while providing for material support to attend these courses, hence expediting the process of integration.

- Psychological support: for those fleeing harsh situations of war, conflict and poverty, and who face trauma and/or the consequences of hardship and upheaval, psychological support is required, and it needs to be free, consistent and available over the long term.
- A multi-stakeholder task force: participants felt that this would be extremely helpful and important in revisiting the curriculum for cultural sensitivity and adaptedness, inclusivity, responsiveness, comprehensiveness, and also to place students adequately in spaces that would benefit them, with all the required support.
- Collaboration between government and NGOs: participants expressed how the government could fund and/or subcontract services to these NGOs, who over the years have developed specialisation and experience and are strongly positioned to deliver.
- Literacy classes: more are needed, and they need to be carefully designed, not least in working around the time availability of migrant learners, and also to be adapted to their immediate needs, while providing material support.
- Tackle language barriers: resources are needed, both human and financial, to cover the demand when it comes to learning English and also Maltese. Once

again, participants felt that resources and funding need to be made available to NGOs already providing these. One student commented how language studies should be obligatory, but how students need to get some or other living allowance while they are learning a language and getting equipped for education, otherwise the trail is interrupted.

- Training at using technological tools e.g. google and email: having access to the internet is not enough if one does not know how to use the tools available.
- Invest in migrant teachers: this can have a useful snowball effect, is resource-effective and culturally responsive and sensitive. It also translates into a strategic move to invest in the teaching of migrants.
- Hire teachers from migrant background: Teachers that are representative of the changing ethnic make-up of Malta and that understand the student population can influence students, are respected, and can also serve as an example and encourage students to pursue their education while addressing racism and xenophobia. The education department can effectively reach out to encourage migrants to study to become a teacher, but this requires adaptations in the requirements. For example, there needs to be a re-evaluation of the extent to which Maltese is required to pursue the teaching course.
- Equip educational stakeholders with skills and financial resources to create adequate and responsive educational policies: this can only be done with adequate contact and information directly from diverse migrant communities, to learn about their needs, the contexts and problems they face, and more importantly to listen and learn from their own solutions.

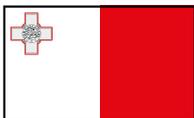
**it would be helpful to have courses offered at different times to accommodate different working hours and routines of different migrants**



- Educate teachers, teaching staff and other stakeholders about the needs of migrant students: this needs to be done through the degree course at university as well as other (ongoing) professional training: teachers need much training in a range of areas, including cultural dimensions, what is happening in certain countries, wars, why people migrate, how to respond to the needs of migrant students with trauma, how to handle crises, and how to address racism in class. This education has to be ongoing and part of the school policy. A shift is urgently required. Maltese classrooms are ethnically, linguistically, culturally and socially diverse, and this diversity is bound to increase. The whole education system needs to acknowledge and respond to this reality; the system needs an overhaul, not tweaking. Teachers and educators need to be adequately equipped with a set of cultural and heuristic skills, but these teachers need effective support to do this, including through guidelines, support roles etc.
- Financial support: this is critical in education being even considered a possibility at all, especially when it comes to youth over the age of compulsory education and young adults who wish to develop their skills and/or pursue higher education. Participants discussed a number of possibilities as to how this financial assistance can be provided, including: a fund to assist immigrant students including soft loans for higher education; work-study programmes to support with paying tuition fees; or sponsorships.
- Flexibility in modality of courses: it would be helpful to have courses offered at different times to accommodate different working hours and routines of different migrants. This would ease a major barrier, that is time constraints bound to the persistent need to work to survive.
- Revisit the curriculum, teaching resources and modes of delivery and practice in primary and secondary education: at various junctures, participants stressed that curricula across the board need to be revisited together with critical input from migrant learners, to include and account for cultural diversity and inclusivity, among others. Participants stressed the need to also have a curriculum that teaches children,

for example, about mixed marriages, about African cultures, how bilingual families negotiate languages and cultures within families etc.

- Adapt learning materials: to include simple structures using diagrams and drawings to address a range of cultural issues as well as different ways and approaches to learning, especially with children. Participants also mentioned the need for more multimedia tools for educators.
  - Promote cultural activities within schools to promote awareness of cultural diversity: this would benefit not only children but also teachers themselves, who can learn more about the children they have in their class every day.
  - Tackle racism head-on: Participants were firm in the idea that racism needs to be nipped in the bud at schools and higher education institutions. It does exist and it is rife. While many of the measures outlined above do contribute to tackling the problem, participants agreed that there is also a need for more concrete measures, including policies addressing cases of racial discrimination by teachers within schools and a strategy on how to tackle these within educational institutions.
- Create favourable working conditions for educated migrants: Participants mentioned on multiple occasions how a view of education as having viable returns on investment, notably employment, serves as a strong motivator to embark on and continue studying. Migrants, notably refugees and asylum seekers, need to see scope for education as a means to an end as well, alongside developing relationships, contacts, inclusion and so much more.
  - Mentorship: mentioned at multiple points, mentors can act as solid points of reference and support, for example when seeking information, application procedures, dealing with institutions etc. but they also serve as key role models when these are from one's own or other migrant communities.
  - The need to invest in and have more teachers who are migrants themselves: this serves not only issues of cultural adaptability and responsiveness, but also psychological dimensions, that is migrant students have role models to look up to and in whose footsteps to follow. It also changes perceptions of education and its functional scope.
  - Work on having policy makers who are migrants in positions of power: this, participants insisted, is related to the need to change perceptions of migrants, but also to having migrant voices represented at higher levels, including in decision making. It is only then that their concerns will genuinely start to be considered.



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